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## IMPRESSIONISM: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY'S DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION TO ART\*

Impressionism is the special art, or perhaps one had better say the most distinctive contribution to art, of the nineteenth century. And yet, despite the fact that the doctrine and practice of the school have been made the theme for extensive discussion, it is safe enough to affirm that no school of painting to-day is less understood.

Thanks perhaps to the extremists or to the less skillful exemplars of *plein air* painting, impressionism is too often regarded as an expression for that which is unusual, odd, eccentric—the personal vagary or license of certain artists in matters of technique. Really, in the hands of its most clever exponents, impression-

ism is the apogee of realism. It is not the hobby or whimsicality of a few technicians, but the outcome of strenuous effort directed in strictly scientific channels.

The cult, if cult one may call it, has comparatively few good representatives—Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Renoir, Caillebotte, Hassam, and a few others—but the influence of these men has pervaded the realistic painting of the day, and has made itself felt as a power where one would, perhaps, little suspect its presence. As a movement, therefore, impressionism is interesting and important alike to art student and art lover, and one may here profitably summarize its



LE CASSINE DES NYMPHÉAS  
By Claude Monet

\* Illustrations of the work of Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, and Renoir used here by courtesy of Durand-Ruel.

advocates' aims and ambitions, following closely the careful analyses of D. S. MacColl and W. C. Brownell, often using their exact words.

First a word of general review.

Aerial mystery, the crepuscular spirit, as it has been called, which had no place in early art—it being thought unfriendly to clear majesty of form—underlies the advances made by the impressionists. England and France during the last century lent the complicity of mood that these particular advances demanded. It was in landscape naturally that the greatest progress was made, but portraits, human scenes, and even monumental decorations took new life when subjected to a new influence. Nature was added to man (to reverse Bacon's phrase) in a new proportion; legend itself paid the debt and took in its aerial tissue a fresh color to the mind.

No century, it should be noted, has seen a relation so fitful between imagination and the instrument employed by the artist. In none has art been so free; that is, so private, so little a thing of command or even wide consent. The absence of a religion, of an architecture, of a court or a caste of patrons, of a common language, audience, and intention, left individual inspiration to its own fires, languors, and eccentricities. A picture was thus an expression of an artist's uncommissioned mood.

The illustration of contemporary appearances and events that under other circumstances would naturally have been demanded from painters was increasingly diverted to photography. In the competition of fancies and systems of design among artists it was hard indeed for the strong imaginations not working in land-



PÊCHEUSE  
By P. A. Renoir

scape to be sure of themselves, and to build up, against indifference or distaste, an unattached solitary monument. A Delacroix, a Stevens, a Rodin, a Rossetti, meant an extraordinary triumph of single force against inertia and the discouraging presence of all the past. So, too, with Manet, Monet, and their line of succession.

The landscape-painters even producing the new contemporary art quickly outran the comprehension of the public, as their effort became more specialized to an individual choice of beauty or moody concentration. No man hired them, even the exhibitions were frequently hostile, and it was with difficulty that Constable, Corot, Rousseau, Millet, earned their wages. There was a danger here that the poet should become a soliloquist or a crank—I am using here, as I shall frequently use throughout this article, MacColl's words.

Exhibitions themselves, necessary as markets for unattached artists, stamp the century with a peculiarly gross way of taking art. People indulged in the picture-pleasure by indiscriminate debauch, in the annual salon or academy, or the international bazaar; and pictures were painted with the exhibition in view. Denon, Napoleon's director of museums, by his institution of prizes, gave an impulse to the production of huge historical machines, with no particular destination. As the century went on its original men were more and more excluded from or maltreated in the exhibitions, or they shunned them in disgust.

In a word, the times were ripe for the strong, the original men of



MARCHANDE D'ORANGES  
By P. A. Renoir

the century to rebel against the existing régime, and in the face of discouragements, even ridicule, to produce something new. And what, exactly, was the special and final addition made to the instrument of painting in the nineteenth century? It may be expressed by saying that painting accepted at last the full contents of actual vision as material; that is, all that is given in the colored camera-reflection of the real world.

This sounds technical. It means simply this, that the new men, the advocates of reform, recognized that the older realists in painting were false to fact in their treatment of light, and while recognizing that bright, glorious, luminous sunlight is unpaintable, they undertook by a peculiar selection of a palette, and by a peculiar manipulation of pigments, to give the impression of the actual, as we see it in the world of daily experience. In the matter of light and shade the old realists merely painted *relative* values in a more or less arbitrarily determined scale; Manet, who led the way to the so-called impressionistic school by his discoveries and his practices, painted *absolute* values, but in a wisely limited gamut; while Monet, who is recognized as the leader of the impressionists, paints *absolute* values in a very wide range, *plus sunlight*, as nearly as he can get it.

Thus the efforts of the new men were directed toward making pictures, not approximate resemblances of scenes, but actual scenes; that is, canvases luminous with real light and marked by gradations of shadow of the same value as we see in the world about us. This was a radical step, and potentially one of greatest importance to the art of painting, since it was a step from arbitrarily determined conventions to an actuality never before attained.

As a matter of fact, every artist chooses his colors and selects the elements of his picture for special definition according to his needs. He uses his sight for a particular purpose, and makes an abstract in shorthand of what he sees. MacColl likens an artist to a business man hurrying to catch a train. A thousand things fall upon the business man's eye, but of these he makes special note only of a few buildings, a few signs, a few turning-points, a few guide-posts, so to speak. From time immemorial the vision of the artist has drawn as sparingly for the purposes of his art on all that is offered it as the vision of the business man referred to draws on the multitude of objects presented to it on a trip to the station. But manifestly the more perfect an artist's vision is, or the more alert the artist is to what is brought before his attention, and the more generously he uses the material offered him, the wider is the scope of the new beauties that he can transfer to his canvas.

The painter's image farthest removed from natural completeness is the illuminator's—one of outlines filled in with a flat tint. Shadow and light are added to these in a few markings to explain form. Tints are likewise added, it is true, but tone is ignored. It would be an

interesting study to trace the compromises between this system and on the one hand the decorative sense of certain painters, leading them to omit one note to multiply the hues of another, and on the other hand the influence of naturalistic study in portrait and landscape, leading to a closer matching of tints in flesh and atmospheric distance.

Suffice it here to say that at the summit of Italian art, when the sculpturesque modeling, the architectural perspective and foreshortening, the aerial distance of the Florentines and Umbrians, had been taken into painting, the Venetians still maintained in principle for their great foreground compositions the system of a half-tone of local color for the great body of an object, with an admixture of white for the lights and of a warm dark in the shadows. In Veronese this system is applied with magnificent breadth; the spaces of half-tone are kept large and full of color, the shadows are never black, and the lights are never so bright that the prevailing local color or color of the thing in diffused light is felt throughout. Rubens read the shadows browner, dodged the strong blues, screwed up the light and the half-tone, and did not mind if a brown-shadowed foreground broke off rather sharply from the high aerial blue he substituted for the deeper Venetian tone. Blue was the difficult point for the graver naturalists. Velasquez used it sparingly, and in reduced gray shades. Rembrandt, broadening his shadows, ruled out blue, and wrought in degrees of a warm monochrome, with local reds and yellows.

In the landscape-painting of the seventeenth century the disappearance of the polychrome tableau from the foreground left the artist free to pursue a more natural logic of color, to bring the scene under a unity of lighting, to vary the key of light from cool to warm. Aerial gradations of tone became more delicate, and misty envelope and obscurity, with the sentiments that belong to them, gained a greater place in the art. But these excursions into natural effect remained relative to a gray or brown foundation.

No painter inquired into the color of shadows as persistently as he inquired into color of half-tones and lights, or grasped the principle of the action of light so completely as to conceive of a blue key or envelope for a scene instead of a brown. Vermeer comes nearest to such a conception at this point, as Piero della Francesca and Perugino at an earlier day.

In the first part of the nineteenth century the studies of English landscape-painters in natural lighting were accompanied by the researches of science into the laws of light. First Turner and then Delacroix, the typical English and French painters of that time, who had developed their art on traditional lines, received the full force of the new impulse; and the conceptions that so profoundly modified their art have made, modified, or wrecked the work of most of their successors up to the final impotent assault upon the highest pitches of light made by the Pointillists.

Turner, it is interesting to note, was a student of books on light and color, and Delacroix is said to have discovered for himself the laws of simultaneous contrast of colors published by Chevreul in 1838. Two painters in the school of landscape succeeding Delacroix and

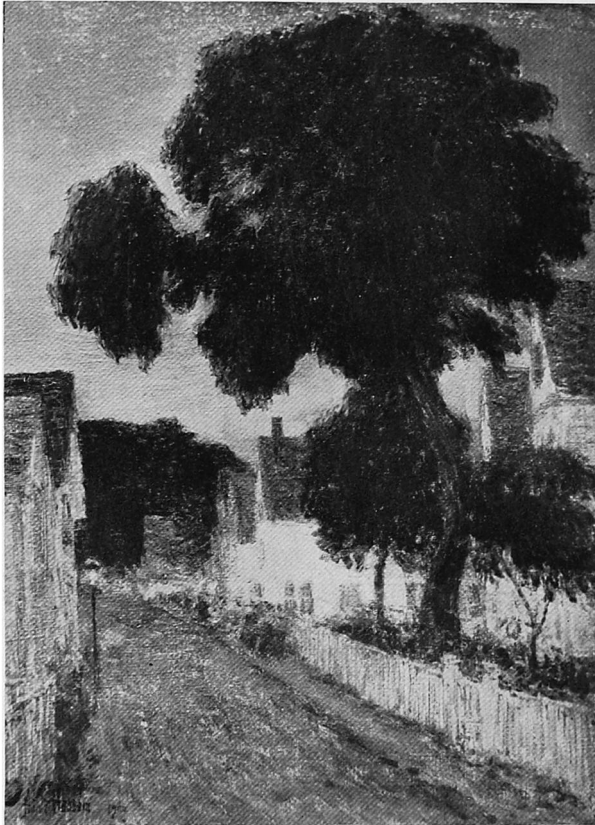


PAYSAGE AUX ENVIRONS DE MORET  
By Alfred Sisley

Corot, namely, Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro, received from Turner in 1870 the impulsion and the clue to the rendering of high and vivid landscape illumination. It is with these men that the word "impressionist" acquired its peculiar significance as an art term.

This new vision that had been growing up among the landscape-painters simplifies as well as complicates the old. For purposes of

analysis it sees the world as a mosaic of patches of color, such and such a hue of such and such a tone of such and such a shape. The old vision had beaten out three separate acts—the determination of



A VILLAGE STREET  
By Childe Hassam

the edges and limits of things, the shading and modeling of the spaces in between with black and white, and the tinting of these spaces with their local color. The new analysis looked first for color, and for a different color in each patch of shade or light. The old painting followed the old vision by its three processes of drawing the contours, modeling the chiaroscuro in dead color, and finally coloring



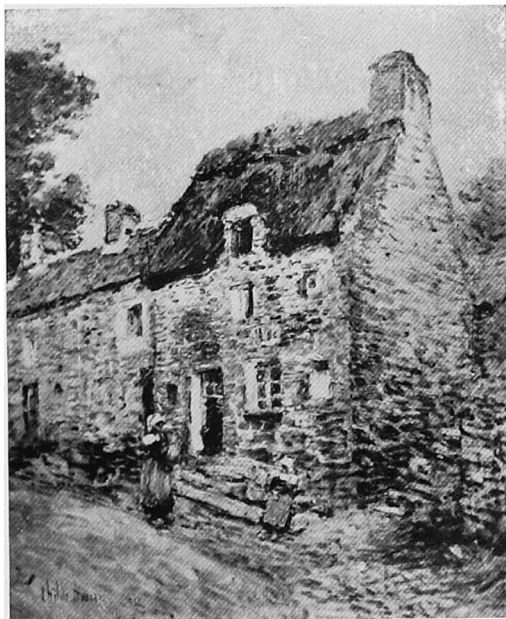
this black-and-white preparation. The new analysis left the contours to be determined by the junction, more or less fused, of the color patches, instead of rigidly defining them as they are known to be defined when seen near at hand or felt.

Painting thus tended to follow this new vision by substituting one process for three—the painter, viewing his scene, matched the hue and tone at once of each patch and made a patch on the canvas of the corresponding shape, ceasing to think in lines except as the boundaries by which these patches limit one another.

Monet is commonly regarded as the great apostle of impressionism, but it was Manet who paved the way for its theories and practices. He was one of the most noteworthy painters of his country and of his age, coming upon the field unheralded, and undertaking what no one else thought of undertaking—the immense project, as W. C. Brownell puts it, of breaking, not relatively but absolutely, with the conventional. Looking for the first time at one of his pictures, one says that customary notions, ordinary brushes, traditional processes, of even the highest authenticity, have been thrown to the winds.

Hence, indeed, the scandal which he caused in art circles from the first, and which went on increasing until, owing to the acceptance, with modifications, of his point of view by the most virile and vigorous painters of the day, he became in a sense the head of the corner.

Manet's great distinction is to have discovered that the sense of reality is achieved with a thousand-fold greater intensity by getting as near as possible to the *actual* rather than resting content with the *relative* value of every detail, as in



A BRITTANY COTTAGE  
By Childe Hassam

the case of the earlier painters. Every one who has painted since Manet has either followed him in this effort, or has appeared jejune. The old masters are still admirable, though they only observed a correspondence to the actual scale of natural values and were not concerned with imitation of it. But nowadays, the one thing that is insisted on as a starting-point and basis, at the very least, is the sense of reality.

From Manet, who sought to impart the sense of reality to his paintings by insistence upon getting as near as possible to the individual values of objects as they are seen in nature, to Monet, who succeeded



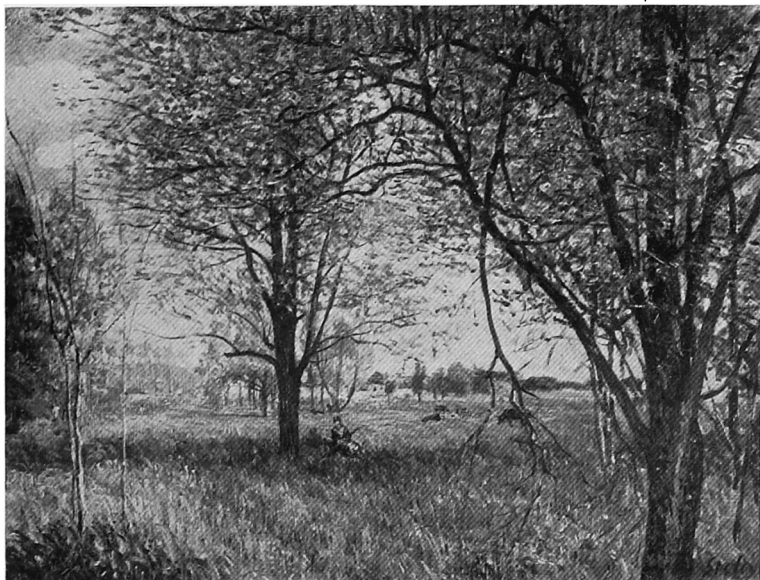
MARCHANDE D'ORANGES  
By P. A. Renoir

ed in popularizing impressionism, was a long step, but a natural one. Monet first came under the influence of Boudin, and later, with his friend Pissarro, under that of Turner in London, in 1870. He was impressed with the English artist's painting of snow, with his discrimination of color in lights and shadows, and with the daring of his flame-colored sunrises and sunsets. As Manet discovered that the sense of actuality was acquired by painting things as nearly as possible in the true values in which we commonly see them about us, so Monet discovered that light is the most important factor in the painting of out of doors.

He, as Mr. Brownell says, pushed up the key of landscape-painting to its highest power. He attacked the fascinating, but of course demonstrably unsolvable, problem of painting sunlight, not illusively as Fortuny had done, by relying on contrasts of light and dark correspondent in scale, but positively and realistically. He realized as nearly as possible the effect of sunlight; that is to say, he did as well as

and no better in this respect than Fortuny had done, but he created a much greater illusion of a sunlight landscape than any one had ever done before him, by painting those parts of his picture not in sunlight with the exact truth that in painting objects in shadow the palette can compass.

Mr. Brownell gives an apt illustration in explanation of Monet's practice. Take a landscape, he says, with a cloudy sky, which means

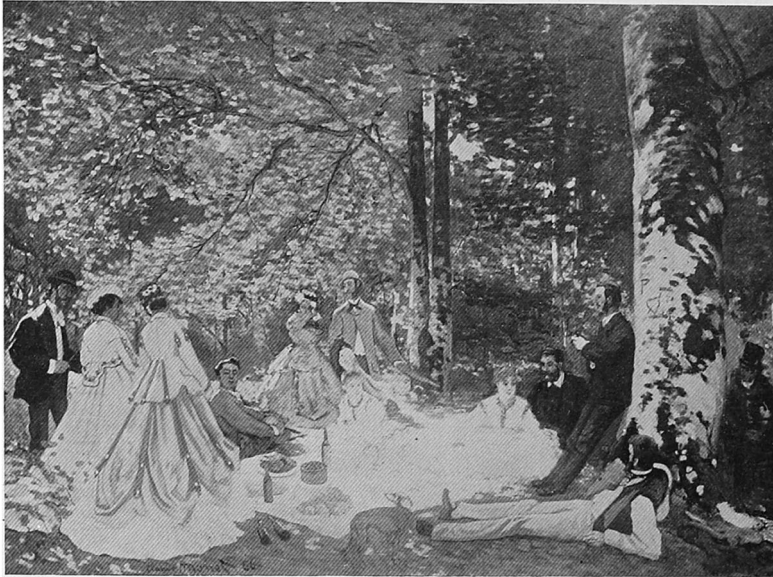


LANDSCAPE  
By Alfred Sisley

diffused light in the old sense of the term, and observe the effect upon it of a sudden burst of sunlight. What is the effect where considerable portions of the scene are suddenly thrown into marked shadow, as well as others illuminated with intense light? Is the absolute value of the parts in shadow lowered or raised? Raised, of course, by reflected light. Formerly to get the contrast between sunlight and shadow in proper scale the painter would have painted the shadows darker than they were before the sun appeared. Relatively they are darker, since their value, though heightened, is raised infinitely less than the parts in sunlight. Absolutely, their value is raised considerably. If, therefore, they are painted lighter than they were before the sun appeared, they in themselves seem truer. The

part of Monet's picture that is in shadow is measurably true, far truer than it would have been if painted under the old theory of correspondence, and had been unnaturally darkened to express the relation of contrast between shadow and sunlight.

Scale has been lost. What has been gained? Simply truth of impressionistic effect. Why? Because we know and judge and appreciate and feel the measure of truth with which objects in shadow

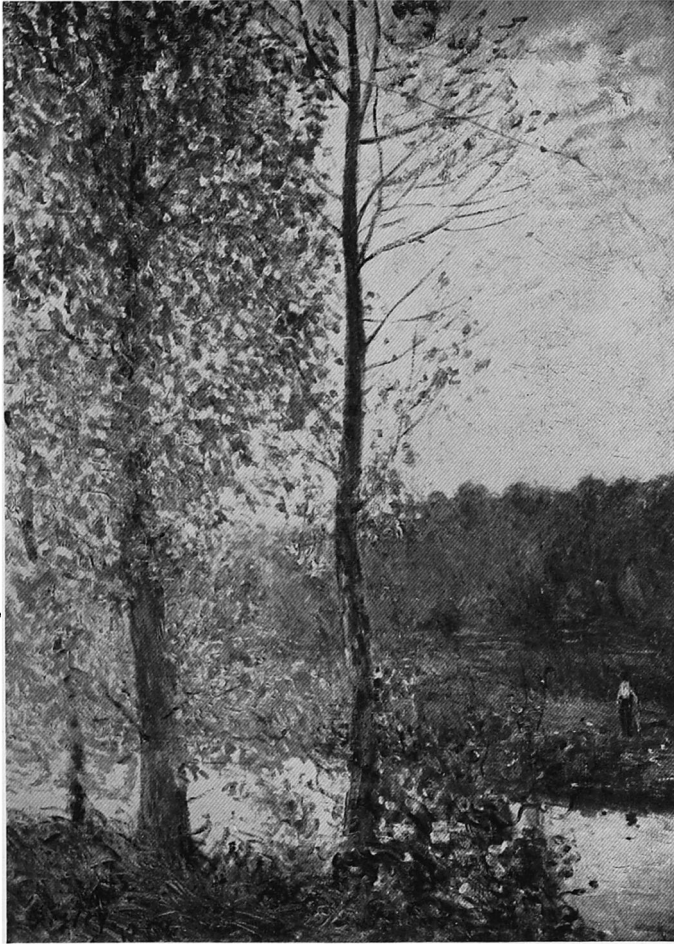


LE DÉJEÛNER SUR L'HERBE  
By Claude Monet

are represented; we are insensibly more familiar with them in nature than with objects directly sun-illuminated, the values as well as the definition of which are far vaguer to us on account of their blinding and infinite heightening by a luminosity absolutely overpowering. In a word, in sunlit landscapes objects in shadow are what we customarily and unconsciously see and note and know, and the illusion is greater if the relation between them and the object in sunlight, whose value habitually we do not note, be neglected or falsified.

Thus in Monet's work each part, sunlight and shadow, is truer than ever before was painted, and he thus succeeds in giving an impression of actuality much greater than his predecessors had succeeded in acquiring. Monet is so settled in his own way, so superbly

successful within his own limits, that Mr. Brownell thinks it is time wasted to quarrel with the convention-steeped Philistine, who refuses to



SOLEIL D'AUTOMNE, MATIN  
By Alfred Sisley

comprehend even his point of view, who judges the pictures he sees by the pictures he has seen. Monet has not only discovered a new way of looking at nature, but he has justified it in a thousand particulars.

Concentrated as his attention has been upon the effects of light and atmosphere, he has reproduced an infinity of nature's moods that are charming in proportion to their transitoriness, and whose fleeting beauties he has caught and permanently fixed. Rousseau made the most careful studies and then combined them in his studio. Courbet

made his sketch more or less perfect face to face with his subject, and elaborated it afterward away from it. Corot painted his picture from nature, but put the Corot into it in his studio. Monet's practice is in comparison drastically thorough. After thirty minutes, he says, the light changes; he must stop and return the next day at the same hour. The result is immensely real, and in Monet's hands immensely varied. One may say as much, having regard to their different degrees of success, of Pissarro, who influenced him, and of Caille-

botte, Renoir, Sisley, and the rest of the impressionists who followed him. These men are all interesting in their several ways.

Thus Monet's one supreme aim is ærial effect. His drawing is an extreme case of the sacrifice of many constituent elements of a scene to one which had been tentatively pursued by his predecessors. Delacroix hankered after the suggestive force of the sketch. In Constable's sketches we often find the essence of what he sought more vividly than in his finished compositions. In Courbet there was a war between tradition and instinct, since he refused to take the flower-bed view of color, and constructed and finished his forms as if his aim had been a Raphaelesque beauty. Monet adopts the sketch



JEUNE FILLE AU PANIER  
By P. A. Renoir



LE BOULEVARD—EFFET D'HIVER  
By Camille Pissarro

method entirely, treating water, land, and buildings as so much scaffolding for his ærial effects, seeing the world as the subject of light, the mirror of events in the sky.

He aims at a stricter truth than Turner, at seizing the momentary balance of values that make the beauty of an illumination. Turner mixed different moments of a sunset, different quarters of a sunset, and his notes went to make up a harmony elaborated in the studio. Monet took his canvas or set of canvases into the open, and limited himself to what he could seize of a particular illumination while it lasted. Out of one subject, a haystack, a church, a tree, he made twenty pictures by discrimination of successive lights that played upon them. From these various causes he made of painting a journal of effects noted in shorthand, as compared with those rhythmical compositions that Turner based upon his notes.

The critic of Monet's work has urged that his aim is scientific, not artistic. This is not true. At each period in painting, when a special aspect of reality is explored for its beauties and significance, the science of that aspect is inevitably involved; what is sought as fresh beauty can be described as fresh fact. The pursuit of the

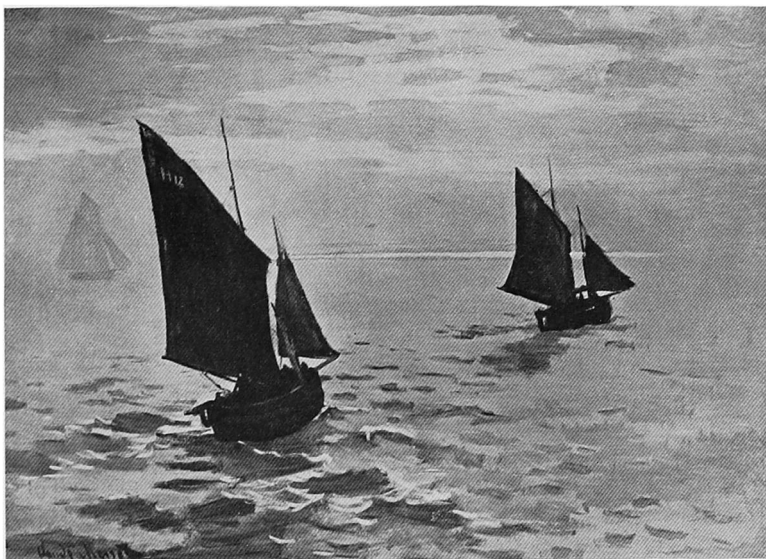
beauties of the human form brings in the facts of anatomy, and the construction of space and the foreshortening of shapes involve the principles of perspective. Even so, the special modern delight in the beauties of aerial tone may be represented as a study of the science of light and color; but this stricter conformity with fact and science is, like the others, a result of art, of the search for beauty, not of fact for its own sake. In our own time the beauty of aerial tones has had a peculiar power to excite in us the sense of reality; with the shift to some other aspect of reality as the most beautiful and important, it may well come about that the landscapes of Monet will appear as a fantastic convention, in which all facts are despised for the attractive beauty of this one, the aerial harmony.

The critic may take more reasonable ground in pleading that in the pursuit of this one beauty Monet carries his contempt of others so far that they take their revenge and defeat him; that of these countless snatches of beauty, many will appear but desperate, indecisive engagements, and nearly all show birthmarks of accident and scramble, unconsidered forms asserting themselves, material not amenable to rapid summary remaining sore and resentful for its



LE SOIR À DIEPPE  
By Camille Pissarro





**BATEAUX DE PÊCHE**  
By Claude Monet



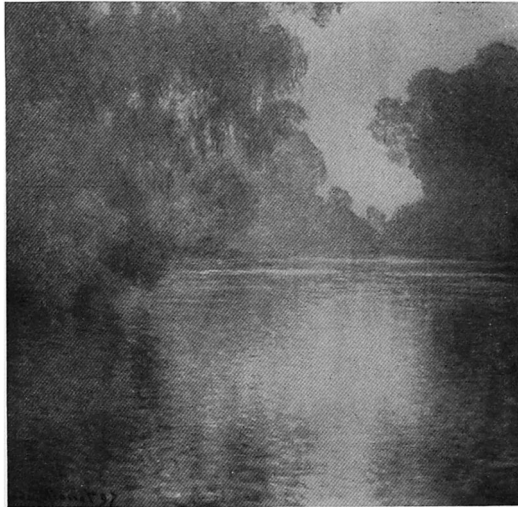
**EFFET DE NEIGE**  
By Alfred Sisley

brusque inclusion. It might be argued, moreover, that in wagering all in matching the passing effect and simplifying the processes of painting to the hurry of that effort, Monet is the victim of illusion, because he is attempting to render beauties that exist indeed, but are beyond the resources of pigment, however strained. For the truth is, that Monet's painting, instead of being an exact, scientific notation of values, is forced like the old painting to traffic and bargain with nature, though the convention struck is a different one.

The new painting of sunlight, therefore, is in its way a convention like the old. Neither can render the lights positively; the old falsified the shadows, making them darker than in nature, so as to keep something of the truth of contrast between them and the lights; the new threw away this resource of effect to gain a general truth of brightness in lights and shadows alike and a positive truth of fair, clear color in the shadows.

In conclusion, a word should be said of the so-called optical mixture of colors, which has done much toward fostering the popular idea that im-

pressionism is little more than an oddity or a vagary. It is well known that lights and pigments do not mix with the same result. Blue and yellow paints, for instance, when mixed, produce green; but blue and yellow lights mixed do nothing of the sort. Green and red lights mixed produce yellow; but green and red pigments mixed produce gray. A scientific consideration of the colors of the spectrum seems to have influenced the impressionists in the determination of their palette. Monet, for instance, excluded black and the browns, and he and his group appear to have worked with the seven rainbow colors. He, however, employed the old system of pigment mixtures, and it remained for the extremists of the school to try the futile experiment of optical mixture.



MATINÉE SUR LA SEINE, GIVERNY  
By Claude Monet



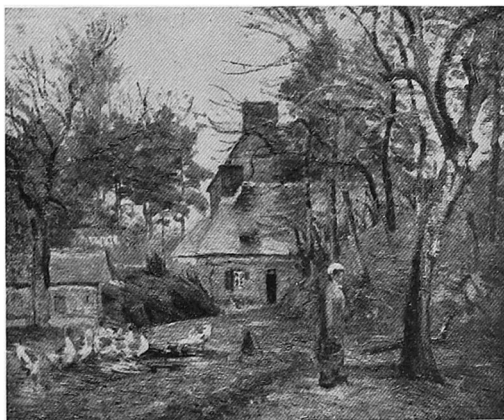
LE PONT DE PONTOISE  
By Camille Pissarro

They saw that it was illogical to model the hues of the palette on the colored lights of the spectrum and then mix them as pigments. Mix two pigments, and not only is the hue different from the mixture of the corresponding lights, but the tone is less brilliant, sometimes by as much as fifty per cent. We must, therefore, they said,

give up Monet's practice of mixing pigments and adopt a technique by which the light reflected from the paints will mix in the eye.

This can be done, they thought, by applying pigments to a surface in fine alternate lines or in dots. When lines have been employed the process has been called "divisionism"; and when dots or points are used, "pointillism." Let us then, the extremists urged, apply our pigments in lines or dots so that at the picture distance the light reflected from them will mix in the eye and combine to form one hue. Theoretically there was ground for this experiment; in practice it was a failure. Paint, in the divisionist's procedure, was too clumsy a medium. It made impossible, moreover, all fine drawing, abolished handling, and replaced the fluent beauties of the material with an ugly mechanical surface.

Impressionism as a school thus seems destined to



VILLAGE SCENE  
By Camille Pissarro

have a slender following, in point of numbers. Like many a creed in other fields of interest, its function would seem to be that of a leaven among other schools. We may not be enthusiastic over the work of Monet and his followers, but we should at least be just in admitting the value of their contribution to pictorial art. Had it not been for the work of these men, the best painting of the present day would not be what it is.



THE STAIRCASE  
By Childe Hassam

A word as to the future. Whatever the painting of the future is to be, Mr. Brownell says, it is certainly not to be the painting of Monet, or, we may add, of any of his successors. For the present no doubt Monet is the last word in painting. He has plainly worked a revolution in his art. He has taken it out of the vicious circle of conformity to, departure from, and return to abstractions and the so-called ideal. No one hereafter who attempts the representation of nature—and for as far ahead as we can see with any confidence, the representation of nature, the pantheistic ideal if one chooses, will increasingly intrench itself as the painter's true aim—no one who seriously attempts to realize this aim of now universal appeal will be able to dispense with Monet's aid. He must perforce follow the lines laid down for him by this astonishing naturalist. Henceforth, the basis of things is bound to be solid, and not superficial, real, and not fantastic. But for the superstructure thus to be erected on the sound basis of just values and true impressions, it is justifiably easy to predict that a greater interest and a more real dignity must obtain than any preoccupation with such a basis of technic as Monet's can possibly have.

HENRY G. STEPHENS.